DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 586 FL 015 462

AUTHOR Nelson, Marie
TITLE Teaching "Writing" to ESL Students: A Process-Based Approach.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 15p.; In: WATESOL Working Papers, Number 2. Fall-Winter 1984-85 (see FL 015 460).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Course Descriptions; *Course Organization; Educational Strategies; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; *Peer Teaching; *Revision (Written Composition); Second Language Instruction; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Free Writing

ABSTRACT

A college-level composition course in English as a second language uses a "freewriting" technique and de-emphasizes rules and structure to emphasize writing strategies. The course is divided into three major segments: drafting, revising, and fine-tuning. In the first segment, students are encouraged to develop fluency by trying a number of topics, writing freely without worrying about form, and learning to identify what is good about their work. When students have gained confidence in their ability to discern what is good in a piece of writing, they are organized in small groups and trained to help each other improve their papers. After students have taken two or three favorite papers through several drafts, successfully incorporating some peer suggestions, they begin to edit successive drafts, using their knowledge of rules to correct mistakes. Finally, they compile their best pieces for a class book. Grammar and mechanics are dealt with incidentally. The method is modeled on the teacher's own writing method, classroom experience, and writing theory. (MSE)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Christine Nelson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED267586

# TEACHING "WRITING" TO ESL STUDENTS:

## A PROCESS-BASED APPROACH

by Marie Nelson

> It is the end of the semester! I am writing and editing now. It is amazing how confortable I feel now about my writing, thanks to the good process of "Free Writing".

These the words (and spellings) of a Costa Rican student I'll call Felicia are the lead to an essay she entitled "Nine Out of One." In it she traced her growth as a writer and the development of an earlier handwritten, half-page freewrite first into a story, then a narrative, and finally a nine-page (single-spaced) expository essay on writing. I cite Felicia's experience because it is typical of what students write in the "process logs" all keep for my class. "Nine Out of One" continues:

> When I went to register for English 100 [George Mason's English 101 alternative for non-native speakers], I thought that my English grammar, pronunciation and communication was going to be better after all. I took some Grammar books to refresh my knowledge, so I wouldn't look like a donkey in front of all the class. What I didn't realize was the way I am learning all at once: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, communication and composition. All these are included in a simple key, "Free Writing".

Felicia had discovered what good writers have always known and what linguists (Krashen, 1978, 1982) have begun to explain--the fact that writers cannot attend to all language features at a time, cannot focus attention on structure and meaning at once. That insight, which Felicia came to in my class, forms the foundation of the "writing" courses I teach. I begin by teaching students to freewrite, saying "Just write quickly, concentrating on what you're trying to say. You can go back and fix it up after you get a draft."

Earlier in the semester Felicia hadn't known about freewriting and, like most students who've been taught a lot of structure and rules but few writing strategies, she was anxious about making grammatical mistakes.

> The time to attend the first English Class came. I remember getting near the room that they assigned us. I was going to pass by only, but I saw all this bunch of foreign people. "Oh, good! They must have a strong accent and probably they make grammar mistakes too, so I am not going to be the only one!"

With most of my students, such fear of evaluation leads to dependence on error-avoidance strategies that produce stiff, convoluted, formulaic, and often boring prose. A result of playing it safe in subject matter and in form, such writing reveals a fear of error that prevents students from trying anything new and therefore from learning anything new about how to write. I try to reverse this pattern.

I divide the writing course into three major sections--getting it down (drafting), getting it right (revising) and checking it out (fine-tuning and editing). Though we never stick rigidly to these divisions, I emphasize strategies for the these phases of writing during the appropriate section of the term. First I help students develop fluency by encouraging them to try out

FL015462

lots of topics, write freely without worry about form for the time being, and identify what is good about their work.

Next, when students feel confident pointing out what they like in each others' writing and can show each other potential for development in drafts, I put them in small groups and train them to help each other make their papers better. The training consists of such things as modeling my own revision strategies, passing around (and answering questions about) multiple drafts of my own articles, giving them the kinds of responses that help me write more easily, having students write about and then discuss their writing problems so others will know how to help them, and drawing attention to the helpful comments they spontaneously make to each other. (Actually, this training begins the first day of class; it is after they are comfortable with these processes that I put them in small groups.) For a total of a half-hour or so before first breaking into groups, students "thinkwrite" for five minutes about what they need from their peers, then read and discuss their thinkwrites. This may be done two or three times during the semester as the focus of learning shifts from fluency to revision to editing for publication. Including class and small-group participation as a significant portion of the final grade motivates serious participation.

Next, when students have taken two or three favorite papers through several drafts, successfully incorporating some suggestions made by their friends, they begin to edit draft after typed draft of their favorite pieces and to monitor closely, invoking their knowledge of rules to correct mistakes. Finally, they compile their best pieces for publication in a class book.

Grammar and mechanics, then, are dealt with incidentally as problems arise in papers, and I follow three guidelines for deciding what to teach each student when. I focus on easily learned features, on highly stigmatized mistakes, and on problems students know how to find in their work. Since we can't possibly cover every rule in the book (and since memorizing rules doesn't help students learn to apply them anyway), I don't feel guilty if I have to leave a few things for them to teach themselves--especially since I've given them lots of (guided) practice looking up and discussing handbook rules in the group.

This method of teaching writing is modeled on how writers (myself included) write; on recent discoveries about students' writing and learning processes; and on theories of language undergirding the field of English Education. Influenced by my months of research observing writers who teach, it also draws on research in first and second language acquisition. My goals are to help students separate and sequence writing tasks and to let them practice writing strategies until they become familiar, then natural, and eventually, intuitively controlled.

Actually, these goals may sound familiar, but "writing" is quite different from what are usually called "composition" approaches. "Writing" works with whole pieces students choose to write. It's "content" is taught incidentally. And to succeed, the teacher must emphasize strengths rather than deficiencies. Felicia described her first impression of my "writing" approach:

> "In this Class you'll be writing like crazy! If you don't like it, you'd better drop the course now. Don't worry about grammar. Don't worry

about spelling, just write and write, this is going to be Free Writing!" our teacher said with a nice Southern accent. I took a deep breath.

Felicia's feelings of relief soon vanished. She'd forgotten about editing:

> Our teacher didn't mention anything about "Editing Essays". That came as a surprise, just about when I was ready to believe that English 100 is a good gift from George Mason University.

Caught by surprise, by the new process of freewriting (turning down the monitor), by subsequent urging from classmates to write more interestingly (turning down the censor) and finally by the realization that writers revise and edit repeatedly, Felicia captured her feelings of frustration in the cartoon that accompanied her essay in the class book. Still, she grew motivated and confident. Her work received many positive comments from her writing group and me. So different was our habit of focusing on strengths, however, that she was again caught caught off guard when a positive comment made her aware of <u>weaknesses</u> in a piece:

> Well, I was writing and writing. Almost every time that I got my papers back, right in the top, I could see these good remarks: "Excellent!, Please read it to the Class, very vivid writing. wonderful details! Show, don't tell, can you tell us some more about this?" Obviously, the word "Excellent" made me feel very good, because at the beginning I was very afraid of my writing. But it was just incredible. Very soon, and under these motivations, I learned that a topic that is boring or stupid for the student is usually excellent and interesting for the teacher and the rest of the Class.

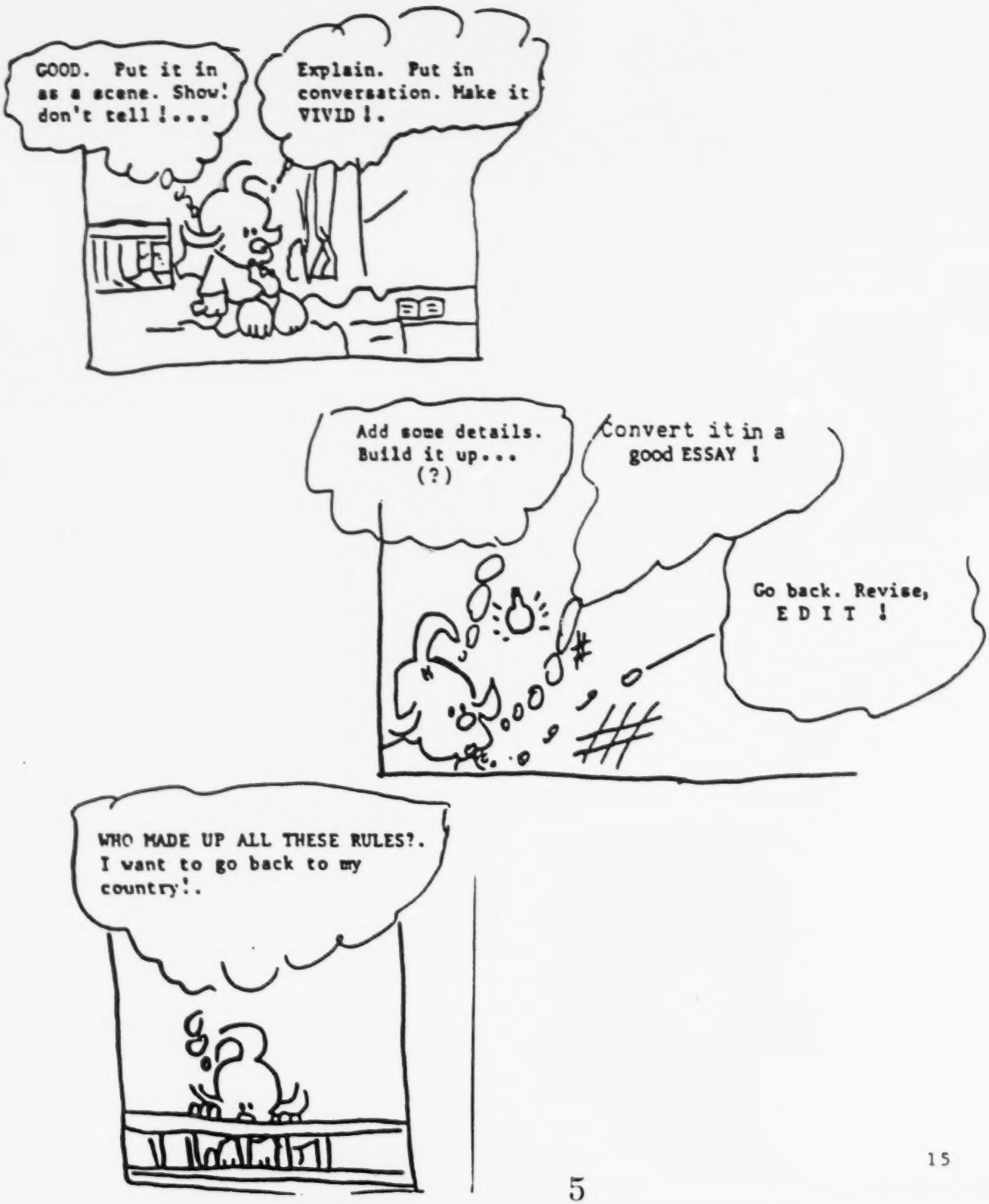
Felicia's initial definition of "boring" as writing about topics she knew about was common, but soon she discovered that such topics were invariably interesting to her class. Students almost always assume the opposite, because--I think--they are used to being assigned impersonal topics. Requiring students who are not yet writers to write only about abstract or "controversial" issues implies that their own interests are worthless or boring and alienates them from their desire to communicate well. Felicia's class confirmed for each other that their experience was a rich resource: They applauded papers with an honest voice, papers which evoked empathy. Felicia also liked the supportive, collaborative atmosphere:

> Thus, just by listening to some other stories, we all got very enthusiastic and it was like being in a marathon without being in a competition.

Growing motivation made students hungry for technique, and they gave constructive criticism, always allowing the writer final decisions about a piece.

> After about three weeks of classes, we were introduced to dialogues, and of course, that was more exciting. When someone didn't complete the description of a certain situation, we did ask about it, leaving the writer the responsibility to write more and more, to complete what he first mentioned.

Soon the class felt confident about what good writing was and about what almost-good writing needed to improve:


GOOD. Put it in as a scene. Show! don't tell !...
Explain. Put in conversation. Make it VIVID !.
Add some details. Build it up... (?)
Convert it in a good ESSAY !
Go back. Revise, E D I T !
WHO MADE UP ALL THESE RULES?. I want to go back to my country!.

We learned to push the writer to develop an incomplete but interesting topic, like instead of just saying, "...and after that I went to the movies..." the writer was writing, "...and after eating dinner and enjoying all my family reunion and conversation, I went to see a movie named 'the Green Mountains of Seattle' that is about ..."

Felicia gave a personal example to elaborate her point:

There is an example of this process of free simple writing with the results of an Essay. It happened to me. On January 24, 1983 [the first week of the semester], I wrote this:

"A time when my feelings were hurt

I remember once when my feelings were really hurt. It was about five years ago, when a co-worker was trying to bring down my reputation as a good assistant of my boss. For some reason that I ignore, I didn't like this person, whom I believe, has a lot of conplexes about herself.

Without my knowledge, she did a lot of disgusting things to make everybody believe or have the wrong idea about the way I was conducting the Office. She has enough imagination and time to create dark shades about my personality.

The above mentioned story on which I did work very hard to make interesting, came back to me with notes from my teacher, that made me feel very bad....Within some of her notes, I could see something that made me feel a cold sensation all over my skin. "Read to class. Excellent example of a great but underdeveloped topic" ....

Though she had not yet consciously revised her definition of "boring," my criticism motivated Felicia to take a risk in this piece:

Since it was almost the beginning of the semester, one day I sat down to write just another story, another Homework, but right in front of me, I had what my teacher gave me. Again I was reading those comments. The words that were bothering me the most, were, "underdeveloped topic". So finally I decided to remember step by step about the time when my feelings were hurt. "It is going to be very personal and maybe boring, but I have to develop this story! Nobody else can. I am the only one in this Class who can write all about it!" I thought. And here is the result:

Here Felicia inserted the text of her often revised narrative as evidence of how she learned to write with confidence. By reflecting on her experience, she had produced a thoughtful essay. "A Time When My Feelings Were Hurt" began with a formal introduction:

Throughout human History, people have sought the most effective ways to change the beliefs, attitudes and behavior of others. Social interaction can produce, somehow, great changes in the way people can think and act. From my personal experience I can tell that there is no one specific age to determine whether a person can continue with the same way to see and take the world. For example I used to be different. I did believe that bad intentioned people were only in the imagination of some writers, to

produce dramatic situations, or in some ethnic groups, where education was unknown. These beliefs, regarding badness in people, were very honest until the day that a co-worker hurt my feelings.

Felicia told how, five years earlier, a co-worker tried to destroy her reputation by distributing copies of confidential reports taken from Felicia's files. Felicia had been too naive to question the woman's behavior but described it from memory, skillfully foreshadowing her story's inevitable conclusion. Introducing the villain, however, she reveals her biases.

> I remember when I met her. Her name is Eva. She was in the Office for three months before they hired me. Pretty rude, she just said "hi". I noticed that her manners were not the best. She got up from her desk and went to the next door, saying "I have to go to the bathroom." Fat and ugly. With ordinary dentures, oily flat hair, and some nail enamel on her finger nails. Her features were typical of a Latin American Indian, big-rounded dark face, flat-big nose and pronounced cheek bones.

The piece led to responses from Felicia's group and motivated other essays illustrating other attitudes. I did not know this at the time, for Felicia never showed me this particular piece. (I read it first in Voices from Across Cultural Borders, the inch-thick book her class published at the end of the term.) The fact that she decided to embed it, at the last minute, into an essay on writing accounts, I suppose, for some mechanical errors in the sections on writing. I never edit the pieces students put into their books, however; I read successive drafts, underline correct sections,and point out one or two glaring errors in each draft. Students are responsible for learning to edit for the book, and embarrassment when others spot errors is the penalty for carelessness.

> The days went on and the fight was initiated.... If I said "What a wonderful day!", she would say "You are wrong, today is humid and also it is supposed to rain, you had better pay attention to the weather report before you say such a stupid statement!" If I wore a nice dress that everybody liked, she would come at any unexpected moment to tell me how out of fashion the dress was.

Felicia developed a believable character through skillful choice of behavioral detail and vivid imagery. Control of mechanics relaxed during emotionally charged scenes, however, even as imagery and detail became powerful.

> Even though, I always avoided talking to her, she used to come to my desk very frequently. Her eyes were rapidly moving into my papers, like a spy trying to picture private archives in a matter of seconds. Doing two things at the same time, thinking that I wasn't aware of them; when she was talking to me, like saying, "You know that there is a good and cheap trip to Europe for only $600.00, don't you?" at the same time she was turning pages of confidential information that I had on my desk. If I stopped her, she would say, "Oh, I am sorry, I wasn't reading anything, that was just an unconscious gesture." And walking as sly as a fox, she would leave me alone.

Though the mechanics are imperfect, this piece was of special interest to me, for otherwise it was as strong as pieces to which I responded on many drafts.

Felicia found more than a good topic in her half-page freewrite. She learned to convert an experience into a powerful expository essay.

## A Rationale for Teaching "Writing"

Now that Felicia has introduced you to my method, I'd like to describe its rationale. These are the assumptions about language and learning on which the approach is based. Several differ from traditional "composition" assumptions.

1. Writing like speaking is natural. Just as everyone learns to speak, everyone can learn to write. This includes ESL, dialect, and standard-speaking writers.

2. Language isn't mastered in isolation. We learn to write as we learn to speak--by interacting with others. That's why teachers need to provide a variety of readers for student writing.

3. Ability expands gradually but naturally when writers control what they write. People learn more surely, in other words, by writing what they want to write. Skill follows experience with real (not practice) writing.

4. Anxiety interferes with learning and with effective expression, so beginners need a safe atmosphere where they aren't penalized for making mistakes.

5. Writing experience is a dependable guide for teachers of writing: If what the text describes doesn't match how you write, you and your students are right to question its validity.

6. Writing can be used academically and personally to discover what we know and to figure out what we need to work on next.

For everyday use, I reduce these six assumptions to two workable rules of thumb. When faced with instruction-related decisions I ask myself two things:

> Is what I'm having students do consistent with how I write, or is it based on someone else's idea of "what English teachers ought to do"?
>
> Have I asked my students what they as writers need (and have I trusted their replies?), or am I retaining control by imposing what I want them to do?

## The Content and Methods of One "Writing" Teacher

Course content is left up to the students, the only required text being the book they publish themselves. Writing is individual and learning to write is natural, so I observe what students' need at each step before I begin to teach. While training them to discover, by "thinkwriting," what they need to learn next, I establish the kind of writing community I as a writer need and tempt them to write by offering the rewards self-sponsored writing brings: publication, self-expression, clarity of thought, emotional release, pleasure at entertaining others, pride at a difficult job well done, and the like.

I teach all writing similarly--remedial writing, ESL writing, graduate courses. In fact, the small-group workshops my graduate students conduct in a

remedial writing center have served as the model for a doctoral writing support system being developed at George Mason, and I am training a writing specialist in small-group tutorial methods to help native-speaking and bilingual students write doctoral-level assignments.

Though each course has two suggested strands, I treat writing from each strand the same way. One strand is academic writing, beginning with "writing to learn," in which students "thinkwrite" freely in learning logs about readings, problems, feelings or content associated with another course. I respond as an interested reader, interacting with their ideas, and make suggestions for further development of ideas they've explored. Students also keep process logs where they reflect on progress and problems with writing, reporting on successive drafts or asking for suggestions when problems arise. They also do thinkwrites to evaluate their progress and decide what to work on next.

The second strand, self-sponsored writing, usually has more appeal. Most students. like Felicia, begin with personal narrative but gradually burst into a variety of forms--poetry, short stories, complaint letters, and essays on injustice or strongly held beliefs--which provide most of the entries in the collections they produce. Felicia's essay on how she learned to develop a formal essay incorporated writing from both strands. So, in fact, did Emir's.

Here's how all writing gets handled:

> I write with students, modeling attitudes, frustrations, successes, revision strategies, and writer talk.
>
> Students are expected to discover their own uses for writing and to write for themselves--not to please me.
>
> Students write daily, in class as well as at home.
>
> Students separate and sequence writing tasks, turning down censor and monitor while drafting freely, then turning them up again to get papers ready for their intended readers.
>
> Students control what they write about, what forms they write in, how much they write, and how much they revise and edit.
>
> Students write for live readers whom they reach by small group sharing, posting their pieces on walls, reading drafts to the class, contributing to weekly mimeographed Excerpts from unrevised and unedited drafts, submitting to a class book near the end of the term, and holding a class reading and publication party during the scheduled exam period.
>
> They read aloud in small groups and trade papers with writing partners.
>
> Sharing and experimenting require a safe atmosphere, so I ban snide, thoughtless, or harshly-phrased criticism of writers or their work.
>
> Students give supportive but constructive responses, using the PQP Guide as a model until they no longer need it: They listen before giving praise (P) to things they like, asking questions (Q) on intriguing or unclear points, and making suggestions for points to polish (P) or revise.

They comment on strengths and experiments such as interesting metaphors, naturally flowing language, vivid details, honest opinions, a spontaneous comparison and contrast structure, exploratory thinking about academic issues, breakthroughs in awareness, or a genre no one else has tried. They also point out sophisticated sentence structures, syntactic variety, appropriate punctuation, and correctly edited prose.

They revise and edit favorite papers for publication in a class book.

Each student gets a single grade, given at the end of the term and based on such features as quantity of writing; improvement; seriousness/hard work; risks taken in content and form; the thoughtfulness/thoroughness/truthfulness of learning logs; number of finished products; correctness of book entries; improvement in using various error-correcting strategies like writing the way they speak, listening to their writing, and visually scanning typed drafts; the amount and effectiveness of revision and editing done; the quality of class participation and of help given others; and their part in producing the class book.

**How Less Advanced ESL Students Respond to "Writing"**

I've characterized how I (and many teachers of native-speakers) teach "writing" in college-level classrooms. In addition, my graduate students use a similar approach in the required, basic-writing program I direct. Below are as-yet unrevised "freewrites" by tutorial center ESL students who've been studying "writing" two hours a week in small, non-credit writing workshops. I took these quotes from the October 10th edition of the weekly Excerpts, distributed the week I presented these remarks at the 1984 WATESOL convention. They illustrate as-yet unedited, unrevised, self-selected writing by remedial ESL writers during the fifth week of fall semester. Below, a Malaysian student starts correctly, freewriting much the way he speaks. Correctness deteriorates slightly as he goes deep into troubling thoughts; this regression is compensated for, however, by a strong personal voice, natural rhythms, and vivid details. This student will revise and edit carefully with his group's help if he chooses to publish this piece:

> It was about 5:00 o'clock. I was sitting on the window with a warm cup of coffee. Outside, wind was blowing the rain all over the place. It was foggy. There is no pedestrian. I could not see far because of the fog. I wrapped a blanket around me and took a sip of coffee. That afternoon brought back lots of my memories. I was thinking of my own future. Why am I struggling with my life so much? I was thinking when I will finish my study and become a engineer. Then I can depend on my self and help my parents.

The next freewrite also has some errors, but some are errors this student can probably correct. I think so because correct spellings ("ringing") and verb endings (past participial) appear elsewhere in the piece. I also know that most students can catch omitted words (see carets) just as I catch them, by reading aloud while editing. The misused possessive is a good example of overgeneralizing a rule; it's correctly formed but used where the average American wouldn't use it. Notice how freewriting again produces a strong, personal voice, natural English-sounding rhythms throughout large portions of the piece, and an engaging sensory immediacy that elicits empathy.

> Rang, Rang, Rang...The alarm clock was ringing. I got up and [˜] still. Then I sat back on my bed. I looked at the clock. It was only 5:00 a.m. I mumbled [˜] myself that this was too early to get up. I still felt so sleepy. I looked at the clock again and began to lie down on my bed. My eyes were close but my brain was not. I was thinking to make a choice for myself. Either I got up and studied for my math's quiz or went back to sleep and got bad grade for not studying. God, I hated myself. I should have studied for it last night and didn't have to worry about it this early in the morning. I got to do it, I knew.

Distributed weekly, the Excerpts reward strong passages and provide diverse models at the approximate level of the students involved. Though unmonitored, they reveal the fluency basic ESL students develop in five weeks. By this time the instructional focus is shifting from fluency to revision: These are the last writings to go into Excerpts without revision. Another five weeks and both emphasis and excerpt standards will have shifted again--to editing for publication and gaining mastery of grammatical and mechanical rules.

Here are some process logs, published in the same issue of Excerpts, which show what this semester's students thought of the program after about five weeks. Process logs are focused freewrites on how writing is going which, when read, help listeners individualize their feedback to each other. They also help the writer focus on what she is learning and identify what she needs to work on next. This one confirms our research team's finding that control of their language decisions motivates basic writers.

> This class is a great motivator. It only asks us to write what we want to write, therefore people are more inclined to write outside of class. At first I was a little insulted by the class. I didn't like the idea to be required to take this class. I thought only on the negative aspect that I couldn't write. But I kept trying to tell myself to look on the positive side....I will probably continue going to CTC even if I get certified. I like small groups and I like being tutored. I feel the tutor is more interested in my work than a regular teacher is. Besides I need help in writing & I want to be good at it because I enjoy writing.

A Vietnamese girl's process thinkwrite leads her to a serious topic weighty enough to develop into an essay for an academic course. Words get left out from writing quickly, and punctuation is almost nonexistent, but articles and prepositions are becoming more natural from practice listening to the rhythms of her writing read aloud and there are no global convolutions to mask the intended meaning. Her tutor tells me that this student knows the rules (she's studied them for years) and can usually apply them during revision and editing. Any spots she's unsure of she can ask for help with later in group, using her own sentences to practice corrections after she elaborates and clarifies these ideas. As with this student, freewriting often smoothes out problems in students' prose; and just as often, it helps them find topics to develop into formal, academic papers. Here is another example:

> My mind just went blank, sometimes my thoughts all in a sudden just disappeared before I had a chance to put them down in a piece of paper. Everyone seemed occupying with their thinking once a while I wish I could somehow creep into people's mind to see what really going on in their heads. Some people can express theirself clearly and effectively, some can not, the different might be their genetic developments and I must

> also include culture, family and many other factors which determine one's ability. I wonder if they can do some experiments on what affect one's thinking potential from birth to adult. But if everyone has the same talent or the same process of thinking, one can substitute for another without any affect then individual will no longer an important of society as a whole.

In this freely written thinkwrite the student overcomes her usual problem of disappearing thoughts. In fact, she is thinking like a scientist, fielding tentative hypotheses and critically examining her own ideas. Elaborating the ideas in this piece could lead to an interesting formal essay, and students learn to recognize such potential in their writing with the help of others in their groups.

### The Principle of Teaching Incidentally, at the Point of Need

Compared to "composition," teaching "writing" involves less direct teaching and lots of guiding students repeatedly through its various phases. This is done until drafting, revising and editing strategies become comfortable, natural, and (for some features and strategies) automatic. After weeks of practice applying constructive criticism and helping others in their groups revise and edit papers, students' awareness of strengths and weaknesses in their work increases. The questions they begin to ask about fine points are answered individually or with the whole class, depending on how many are having the same problem. Classes thus progress along a shifting scale of concerns in the course of a semester, with instruction focusing on those problems students become aware of in a draft, staying near the edges of students' current knowledge--what Krashen (1982) would call the "i = 1" level.

One way to be sure students learn what we teach is to offer answers when they have questions--by postponing direct instruction until after a draft is attempted. At this point, discussions emerge naturally from each writers' needs--to know their strengths, rules, ideas for cutting or expanding, ways to avoid an agreement error, alternatives for organization or punctuation, or strategies for revising a paper for a content-area course.

"Writing" is an organic approach which focuses on <u>strategies</u> students can apply to the academic, personal, or creative writing they do. Instruction is individual, responding to existing drafts, prompted by recognizable strengths and problems, and motivated by students' desire to publish engaging and correct pieces. It focuses on strengths more than on weaknesses so students will feel comfortable experimenting with new techniques and provides lots of practice critiquing each other's work. Once the pressure of first-draft evaluation decreases and students are writing more fluently, their language becomes more natural, more speech-like, and they begin to recognize their mistakes. They also begin to attend to some features intuitively. After weeks of practice freewriting, for example, students find themselves catching some errors as they draft, a phenomenon referred to by Felicia when she wrote:

> What I didn't realize was the way I am learning all at once: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, communication and composition. All these subjects are included in a simple key, "Free Writing".

Let me quote another student, from Felicia's class, who also published a formal essay on learning to write. Emir, as I'll call him, chose this topic

when he noticed a contrast between his experience in my "writing" section of English 100 and his brother's experience, the same semester, with a "composition" section. The writing block Emir began with quickly disappeared, but Sharough continued to be "stopped." A comparison and contrast essay developed from a series of process logs and taken through a dozen drafts, Emir's "Confessions of a Free Writer" opens with a simile ("to get my readers interested") and employs the tone of a writer who knows whereof he speaks:

> As someone who can appreciate good jewelry because he knows about jewels, I can appreciate good writing because I have started learning how to write. No wonder my writing has never been good in any language. I always had to write about boring topics, such as, "What are the advantages and disadvantages of the television?" or "Is advertising important?"... My course, ENGL 100, has been the opportunity to write much better, and to discover how interesting I can be.
>
> I started by free writing. Since I was free to choose my topics, I took ones I liked and cared about. I had many ideas when I was writing about myself, my native country, and my experience. However, when back in high school my teacher asked me to write about very narrow and shallow topics, the kind of writing I was doing was also narrow and shallow. To give you a taste of this old style, I wrote the following lines about advertising and television. "Wonder woman is lovely and Superman is strong. I like the woman in Diet Pepsi's advertising, but I don't buy Pepsi."

Emir goes on to give examples of many things he was learning:

> By free writing I learned that good writing created images in the readers' mind. It was fun to discover how simple words put together could become powerful. [Emir inserted illustrations from his work here]
>
> Putting simple words together to get nice sentences was not enought, I had to be honest and take some risks. Judge by yourself: [passage here].
>
> I discovered by reading others' essays that good writing can relate ideas to what readers have already in mind [excerpt here]. Another important discovery through my reading was that good writing implies rather than giving statements. Since I try to do good writing let me imply by giving an example [inserts his experience reading a "fascinating" article in the Washington Post here]. This was a good piece of writing. When I was reading the article, I didn't hear my brother calling me.

Emir produced five single-spaced, typed pages describing what he learned and giving examples of his before and after writing. Here is another example:

> I also learned that good writing should give images, and include details. The images tickle our imagination, and the writing becomes more vivid. For instance, to describe a woman who had a flat tire on the beltway at 11 p.m., I could of course say, "Marie had a flat tire on the beltway at 11 p.m." By putting details, I could say it in a better way:
>
> > Marie was driving home, 495 was clear. The darkness of the night was sometimes disturbed by the other cars. Everything was going smoothly. She checked her speed. '55 miles per hour, it was okay,' thought Marie. The car's head lamps spotted the exit 7 to Fairfax

> Hospital. Suddenly, the engine's sound became louder, the car started pulling to the right. She got scared, "Oh, God! What's going on?' She took her foot off the accelerator and pushed the break pedal. The car started to decelerate. After 15 seconds that seemed 15 minutes to her, the car stopped. 'Ouf!' Her heart started to decelerate too. Marie turned on her emergency lights, and stepped out to check. The right front tire was flat. "Oh, S- - -!" said she giving a kick to the car.

Emir edited this piece repeatedly, testing phrases orally against his memory of how English sounds, examining every comma and prepositional phrase. Not until the conclusion did he contrast his brother's experience, stating his discovery that writing freely is much more than simple "freewriting."

Writing freely requires being free as a writer, free to take responsibility for your own ideas, to act as serious (or casual) as you feel about your work, to determine with the help of readers who aren't graders what to do to improve a piece. Without writing freely, students progress more slowly, for writing freely allows and requires students to make decisions for themselves--to take responsibility for the success or failure of their work. In Emir's words:

> Through freewriting I finally learned that the process of writing must be felt, pulled out of the brain rather than learned or taught. After one month and half of this English course, I got it! To write freely helps to learn writing. The other day I saw my brother trying to write his research paper. Every body in his class had to choose a topic for his or her research paper. Sharough--my brother--had chosen to write about the following topic, "What is matter?" Despite the fact the had chosen the topic and knew a little about it, he had a hard time with it. It was a broad topic with hundreds of books, and thousands of aspects to be explored. He spent more time reading technical books than writing. My brother didn't know much about this topic. Not only he had to absorb all this new information, but also write.

Emir had also learned that writing is individual and that learning to write must be separated from learning subject matter.

> Learning writing is not that easy, and when the beginner is asked to write about something he or she doesn't care about or does not know much about, the writing gets blocked.

Emir would make an excellent teacher, for he has examined his writing processes, testing the prescriptions of textbooks and teachers against what works for him. He redrafted his essay repeatedly, reconceptualizing his ideas each time rather than simply fine-tuning what he already had. When he became frustrated half-way through, uncertain which draft to choose, I suggested he go back and combine the best of each; when he did, he reoganized them. Though he'd received good grades on formulaic essays in other courses, Emir found no formula to adequately represent the complexity in what he had learned. "Confessions of a Free Writer" has a structure organically rooted in the shape of Emir's ideas, tempered by strategies to capture and keep his readers' attention, and modified by desire to make his main points memorable.

Relying on this experience with writing, Emir could advise Sharough confidently when premature concern for structure was blocking the flow of ideas.

> My brother was stopped. After hard work he found a nice sentence, but he did not want to write it down. He said: "Emir, this sentence belongs to the introduction." I had to explain: "Who cares about introduction, thesis, antithesis, and conclusion?! Just find your ideas, you will fix them later."

He had no trouble transferring the strategies practiced in my class to his brother's problem drafting a formal research paper on a topic from physics.

> He was stopped many times. I don't understand teachers who give research papers when the students don't yet know how to write about familiar topics. When something is strongly felt, words come out much easier.

After describing his brother's experience--both had been in the U.S. about one year--Emir summarized and concluded:

> The example of my brother and I is a good one. His knowledge of English was a little bit less than mine, but after half a semester with the same course but a different teacher, I'm in better shape. He is blocked, while I'm taking off from this land of prejudices on writing. Good writing is honest writing, good writing expresses strong feelings, good writing gives images, good writing is interesting. In short, good writing is not boring.

In a "writing" class, Emir came to the conclusion Felicia made. Both discovered that to write well they needed to define good (and boring) writing for themselves rather than memorizing textbook abstractions about what makes interesting prose. Once they learned to freewrite about topics they cared about, they had no trouble writing formal essays on abstract (pedagogical) issues. I close as Emir closed, and in total agreement with him:

> "In order to learn writing, let's read and write FREELY."

**References**


Krashen, Stephen D. 1978. The Monitor Model & monitoring in Foreign language speech communication. In Rosario C. Gingras (Ed.), Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Krashen, Stephen D. 1981. Second language acquisition and second language learning. New York: Pergamon Press.

Krashen, Stephen D. 1982. Principles and practice in second language acquisition. New York: Pergamon Press.



Marie Wilson Nelson is Assistant Professor of English at George Mason University where she teaches writing courses, trains graduate students to teach writing for the English Department, directs the Composition Tutorial Center, and is responsible for training faculty to teach Writing and Speaking Across-the-Curriculum.